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# **"AND HOLD THE BONDMAN STILL": BIOGEOGRAPHY AND UTOPIA IN SLAVE AND SERF NARRATIVES**

JOHN MACKAY

*"Instinct of the race to survive and expand."*

—Nella Larsen, *Passing*

*The next morning Uncle Robin and Aunt Judy were having their first breakfast in their new home. The whippoorwills were chirping outside. In the distance a Negro harmonica could be heard twanging dreamily.*

*"Isn't it amazing," Aunt Judy said, lifting a mouthful of pancake with her silver fork, "last night we were in the Frederick Douglass Houses and now we're in the Master's Castle."*

—Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*

## **I. BIOGEOGRAPHY**

"Slaves aren't supposed to *move*, except when Master wants them to."

I have placed this rather unsurprising observation at the front of this essay because it points to a dynamic central to what we might call the "topographical imaginary" of slavery. The bondsman's "bonds" are tight circumscriptions, restrictions on movement that tend, in the extreme instance, to actual incarceration or worse: punitive binding of the body, confinement in the hold of a slave ship. (Slave narrators spend a lot of time in jail, too.) On the other hand, slaves, especially the kind of rural or "plantation" slaves I will be talking about here for the most part, are far-from-immobile beings, insofar as they are exploited for their labor. Indeed, one can almost define "exploitation" as "getting people to move, and keeping them moving, in certain ways to the exclusion of others." This suggests an obvious paradox, for slaves must

be kept still *and* moving at the same time. (Of course, something of this paradox applies to all of us “interpellated subjects,” but we can probably agree that it applies to bondsmen in a particularly acute way.) It follows, then, that exploitation demands some space of mobility, and that restriction on slave movement is a matter of degree, though always shadowed by the possibility of radical, absolute constraint.

I will be arguing in this essay that the question of slave mobility has crucial implications for our thinking about the life writing of bondsmen, and especially in relation to its historical/political substructure. In the forms of slavery that evolved and much later collapsed in the United States and in Russia—called here “US slavery” and “Russian serfdom” for short—the dialectic of expansion and constraint permeates this substructure completely. For all the differences between the versions of bondage that emerged in the two countries, neither can be conceptualized except in relation to the historical dynamics of an *expansion* crucially dependent upon bondage for its laboring material base. It has long been known, for example, that a close dialectical relationship existed between “the geographic and economic expansion of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” and “the emergence—in some cases the reemergence—of forced labor on both its eastern and western borders.”<sup>1</sup> The consequence was a striking historical parallelism: two forms of chattel slavery, US bondage and Russian serfdom, emerged at more or less the same time, and collapsed within four years of one another (in 1865 and 1861 respectively). The parallels extend to the level of social relations as well, for “by the middle of the eighteenth century the formal power of the [Russian landowner] over his serfs was as great as that of the American slaveowner over his chattel—almost total, short of deliberate murder” (Kolchin 41).

Historians have further noted (but not fully explored) the possibility of something like a common period of origin for the two systems. David Brion Davis has argued that “the turning point” leading to New World slavery “came with the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453,” after which time Mediterranean Europe was “cut off from its major source of slaves,” including large numbers of Russians. The already expanding slave trade then turned its attention from “the Crimea and the steppes of western Asia [to] sub-Saharan Africa” (56). That the enormous expansion of Muscovy (and with it, the beginnings of serfdom) *also* commences during the reign of Ivan III in the wake of the Ottoman victory points to a conjuncture worth pondering. “The fall of Constantinople,” Robert O. Crummey argues, stimulated Moscow to set itself up “as a definite empire, the successor to that of Byzantium” (144). What seems to have evolved out of this moment, then,

are two distinct, large-scale systems of bondage that contributed crucially to the shape that “modernity” eventually took in their respective countries and beyond.<sup>2</sup> In both countries, the expansion and flux characteristic of the “modern” moved inseparably together with and on the backs of those whom those nations sought to bind and constrain.<sup>3</sup>

The contribution I hope to make here to our understanding of the nexus of bondage and modernity in the US and Russia is a limited one, drawn from my comparative studies of slave and serf narratives, and particularly narratives of *escape*. I will argue that these writings articulate distinctive spatial-political imaginaries, their own mappings of the world into zones of “freedom” and zones of “bondage.” To where can the slave escape, and how are escape, and the travel it involves, possible? And how does one *know* when the “land of liberty” has been reached? Reflecting upon such apparently simple “geographical” questions through the prism of slave narratives not only helps us understand the material and experiential bases of “cultural” landscapes. It can also reveal something about the processes by which conceptions of liberty arose, developed, and changed within the fraught *alternative modernities* associated with slavery and serfdom.

Before moving to the narratives themselves, however, I should offer some account of the relation of mobility and geography to biography more generally. Considered strictly in terms of “structure and content,” biographies of all kinds are frequently divisible into sections or “acts,” generally following the motions of the protagonist(s) from one place (whether metaphorical or not) to another. Insofar as life stories contain what Bakhtin calls a “familiar element of ‘movement’” (140), they very frequently involve passages away-from and back-towards. Though easiest to see in “official” memoirs, written to coincide with some public narrative or “legend,” relevant *topoi* are found everywhere in biography: going off to school, being recruited into the army, the transfer of a bride’s belongings to her husband’s residence, the trauma of forced exile and near escape, and many more besides. The narrated life becomes a map of various sites, some of which the protagonist doesn’t merely “visit” but builds, or even builds upon. Consider, for example, Sergei Aksakov’s semi-fictionalized story (told in the famous *Family Chronicle* of 1846) of his grandfather’s late eighteenth century migration, together with his family and serfs, to the then-remote Orenburg province, where he established “a large and prosperous settlement,” complete with mill and “fine stone church” (15, 9). Leo Tolstoy’s memoirs, too, are filled with striking examples of this building pattern, as in this description from *Boyhood* (1854) of the “changed” behavior of his sister’s governess upon the family’s arrival in Moscow:

The very first Sunday, Mimi came to dinner wearing *such* a splendid dress, and wearing *such* ribbons in her hair, that it was clear that we were no longer in the country, and that everything would be different from now on. (146)<sup>4</sup>

As for “building upon,” we might consider the nobleman Andrei Bolotov’s account (in his very long memoir entitled *Life and Adventures*, begun ca. 1789) of his reclamation of the family estate following years of military service.<sup>5</sup> In all these cases, *event* is keyed to *change of place*, *bios* to *topos*, and a new setting to new conditions for action and development.

Insofar as biographies frequently and conventionally give accounts of a certain life’s “development” or *growth*, we are tempted to give a certain “biotopic” slant to the nexus between life story, motion, and place. Environmental scientists have long known that mobility is an adaptation strategy, as individuals or populations move away from areas that have been exhausted of resources or have proved inimical to life (Jochim). Vladimir Vernadsky, inventor of the term “biosphere,” maintained that the limits of human adaptation are difficult to predict precisely because humans “can reach places that are inaccessible to any other living organisms” (118). It follows, of course, that the limits of *biography* are difficult to predict as well. Yet sometimes the energies of life themselves can drive out life, as contamination and competition force a choice between migration and suffocation. The philosopher Hans Blumenberg sums up the crucial issues for us during an analysis of the Platonic cave-myth, a myth he reduces to the formula “Life cannot remain as and where it is”:

It consumes the conditions of its own possibility, exhausts its substrate, overgrazes its territory and fills the spaces holding it with the waste and detritus produced by its successes, with excrement generated by its metabolism. Development is no secret longing for a higher level; it is the overcoming of difficulties created by the lower level itself, and from which [the living thing] can no longer extricate itself by its own means. Dynamics stem from depletion—having confidence in life, in the vicinity of apocalypse, is based on this paradox.

And Blumenberg further relates these “dynamics” to one of the two most universal moments in biography:

Switching from one biotope or lifeform to another, under the pressure of loss . . . refers back to that most intimate of events, birth: to be ejected from the mother’s womb in order to live, because this womb no longer allows for life; because the life that fills it, *overfills* it. (64–65)

It should be obvious that the form of “life” called *bondage* would seem to preclude or at least obstruct development of the kind Blumenberg describes.<sup>6</sup>

Narratives by both US and Russian bondsmen describe long confinements in “dismal chambers” like the one Sojourner Truth grew up in, so “noxious” that it caused “rheumatisms, and fever-sores, and palsies, that distorted the limbs and racked the bodies of [her] fellow-slaves in after-life” (576). The most harrowing image we have of radical spatial limitation is still surely the garret where Harriet Jacobs spent seven numbing years, but from where she also found ways—mostly through friends and through the mail—to compete with her pursuer “in cunning.”

On the other hand, the colossal collective impact of slave labor upon place and landscape in both countries tends to be “sequestered” from history itself, as *landowners* (like Andrei Bolotov) receive historical tribute for the *land*. D. J. Gregory has noted how traditional historical geography represented landscapes as “‘made’ by fistfuls of the prominent and powerful,”

while the ordinary men and women who were part of that “making”—whose unremitting labors cleared the woods and drained the marshes, and the shape of whose lives was punched out by the contours of the new landscapes—slipped by largely unrecorded. (244)

The imperative to *confine* clearly pervades the entire history of slavery as a mode of production, as well as its structure. Russian serfdom originated with prohibitions on peasant migration—always difficult to control in a country as big as Russia—and only gradually mutated into the full-fledged slavery familiar from historical and literary accounts (Kolchin 2–10). The enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans in the New World began with what was at once a forced migration and total corporeal constraint—the Middle Passage. Indeed, African slaves became the preferred labor source in the US South because they were less able than indentured servants or aboriginal bondsmen to mount a successful escape.<sup>7</sup> On the farms and plantations, the daily spatial-temporal existence of slaves was severely regulated, supervised, and limited. The smooth functioning of the business, as well as the coherence of the quasi-aristocratic, “idyllic” (in Bakhtin’s sense<sup>8</sup>) ideology of the master classes in both countries, depended on mechanisms of confinement. Or as Henry Bibb puts it in a defiant quatrain from his *Narrative*:

And when the eagle’s boldest feat,  
Thou canst perform with skill,  
Then, think to stop proud freedom’s march,  
And hold the bondman still. (559)

Of course, most slave and to a lesser extent serf narratives are quite centrally tales of mobility, so much so that the travel narrative can easily be thought of

as one of the “neighboring” genres. This structural fact leads us to the first big topographical binary in the narratives, the distinction between a space of “slavery” and a space of “freedom.” It is this distinction that allows us to begin exploring the differences between the real/imaginary paths leading between bondage and freedom in the US and in Russia, as lived by slaves themselves.

## II. PASSAGE, PASSING

The first thing to consider is the mechanism of *passage* from the “enslaved” to the “free” space. Passage is the third crucial spatial moment in the narratives, where the bondsman moves within a kind of “noplacel” not identifiable as either bondage or freedom. Because such passage is strictly illegal for the slave, the legitimate *social* routes of human travel are either entirely off-limits or can only be used secretly. Thus the prevalence in slave and serf narratives of disguises, of journeys across wastelands, of “holing up” in garrets and cargo holds, and of the *Underground* Railroad in general.

This problem brings to mind the closely (and not merely punningly) related notion of “passing,” which also involves finding a way to get into some place where you’re not “supposed” to be. To “pass” is to be silently mobile, to break spatial prohibitions without anyone else knowing it. Nella Larsen’s Irene Redfield ponders the topographical consequences of the failure to pass:

It wasn’t that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any *place*, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton [Hotel] would probably do it, that disturbed her. (16, my emphasis)

Passing can therefore be seen as a kind of camouflage, by virtue of which “normal” signification is undemonstratively undone.

I will be operating with a somewhat extended meaning of “passing” here, designed to include all the various ways that passage is effected in slave autobiographies. In the US, this would of course include “passing” as such, as in the light-skinned Ellen Craft’s dual disguise as the white “invalid gentleman” (696). But I would add those long stretches of migration through inhospitable, unpeopled regions, like Bibb’s many crossings of “dismal swamps” and prairies, and William Wells Brown’s final trip down the frozen road somewhere near Dayton, far from “civilized human beings” (417). J. D. Green’s self-concealment in the cotton hold of the good ship “*Pike No. 3*” on the way to Cincinnati would be a related example (985). We see here the slave’s near-total and often physically dangerous retraction from one social space, in order

to move to a *new* one. Perhaps the most interesting variant, however, is the slave's "passing" *as* a slave. Green actually walks on board the *Pike* by putting "a gentleman's trunk on [his] shoulder," and William Craft escapes by passing as the slave of a female slave—his wife—passing as a white man.

The structure linking these diverse modes of camouflage is of course the logic of American racism. A black person must be either a subordinate—a slave-passing-as-slave—or nothing, vanished out of sight—corresponding to the strategies of both standard "passing" and the "passage through wilderness." While operating within this structure, all these passings can prompt serious anxiety in the minds of masters, once doubts arise. Is the person really black, really subordinate, really "nowhere"? In his famous call to conceal the slave's means of escape, Frederick Douglass implies that for the dominant white class this last possibility is deeply analogous to the horrors of racial passing:

I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey. . . . Let us render the tyrant no aid; let us not hold the light by which he can trace the footprints of our flying brother. (351)

Camouflage of *all* types, therefore, makes the slave "untraceable," the logic of American racism inefficacious.

Russian serfs "pass" as well, although one cannot deny the relative ease of the stage of passage for the serf, who flees through a vastly less policed environment than does the US slave, and whose motions are subject to far fewer "racial" obstacles. As with US slaves, few serfs could read, and they would have seemed very different, physically and sartorially, from most noblemen, especially by the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, serfs would have been less distinguishable from the vastly more numerous free peasantry—who, like the serfs, comprised roughly 40 percent of the population (23 million people in 1861)—and would therefore have "blended into" their social surroundings rather more easily. There is often a kind of radical *solitude* recounted in the US narratives, involving a vastly greater necessary proximity to wilderness, wasteland, and inanimate things—the examples of Bibb and Jacobs might be taken as paradigmatic here.<sup>9</sup> Serf exile, by contrast, is relatively social, less continuously nervous, but perhaps more subject to sudden, unexpected disasters.

Though comparable to those in the US, the mechanisms of passage in Russia are differently grounded. In 1785 a highly educated serf named Nikolai Smirnov tried to escape Russia by securing under false pretenses "two orders for fresh post-horses":



one in the name of the [fictitious] lieutenant Miloslavtsov warranting passage though Pskov to Riga, and the second bearing the name of the [equally fictitious] Italian merchant Camporesi, and allowing for travel to Saint Petersburg. (292)<sup>10</sup>

Smirnov had been a “house serf”—his father was the estate manager for one of the best-known Russian noble families—and he had received a remarkable if informal education in arts, languages, and science. In addition to French and English, he knew some Italian, and “in opposition to all law, [called himself] an ‘officer,’ and wore a full-dress uniform in accord with that rank, not having the slightest right to wear it” (292).

Smirnov was an exception in nearly every way, but his manipulation of the tokens of legitimacy—travel passes, uniforms—is a typical strategy of escape. Nearly one hundred years later, the former serf peasant Nikolai Shipov wrote about how, as an escaped serf in the 1830s–40s, he too relied largely on false passports (in addition to garden-variety concealment from his master’s agents).<sup>11</sup> One of the passports for Shipov and his family was secured by members of a notorious self-castrating religious sect. The document came “from the Prussian consulate bearing the name of [Prussian citizen] Peter Johann, his wife Aleksandra, and his son Nikolai” (Zhatkin 449). The same group got him another one “permitting [Russian citizen] ‘Nikolai Nikolaev’ to cross the Austrian border into Russia” (451).

Another of the few serf autobiographers—there are only about sixteen that we know of—sought legitimacy in a less obvious, but more ambitious and indeed “literary” fashion. Known only as “Peter O” or “P,” in 1849 this serf sent to St. Petersburg a long autobiographical poem called *News about Russia*, which was both a report on the sufferings of the peasantry, and (apparently) an attempt to sway the Tsar to abolish serfdom.<sup>12</sup> Through the very strength of his verse testimony, rather than escape, “P” hoped to pass out of servile status and gain recognition at the highest levels of power. When recognized by the Tsar, his poetic achievement, addressed to the royal Romanov family itself, would help to usher in a new period of lifted restrictions:

[Then] the son of a single peasant man  
Will cry out with a poet’s voice, and soon  
Get rank and honor from the world. (148)

Earlier, he had tried to convince his father to join him in directly petitioning the Tsar, hoping to get state support for emancipation:

Merchants, freedmen,  
 Peasants—none of them have any voice  
 Before the law. But might we laymen reach  
 Unto our Tsar, and scorning all corrupt  
 Deceit, make our request before him thus?—

“Our great Tsar—let your new law  
 Rain down upon us!” (52)

What connects these three Russian examples? We see throughout that what enables passage out of bondage is always linked to the category of the *state*: the passport, the military uniform, or (on a more imaginary level) the hypothetical meeting with the Tsar, his new liberating law “raining down upon them.” In other words, the logic structuring “passing” in Russia is the *identification of the person with his or her state status*.<sup>13</sup> Had he not fallen ill in St. Petersburg, for instance, Smirnov might have succeeded in convincing even European travelers that he was indeed “the Italian merchant Camporesi.” He had the paperwork—and as they say, if the forgery stays on the wall long enough, it becomes real.

The consummate literary exploitation of this ideological feature of nineteenth-century Russia—the constitution of the person by state interpellation—is Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, where serfs are to become, but never *quite* become, census data *on* serfs. A still more monstrously grand offspring, found in history and literature alike, is *the figure of the pretender to the throne*, an example of which the narrator-poet “P” dangerously verges on becoming, at least in his own imagination. Russian culture has a well-known fascination with this ultimate political “drag performance.”<sup>14</sup> In Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter*, his fictionalized Emelian Pugachev, the illiterate Cossack leader of the largest peasant uprising in European history (1773), becomes, for his followers, “Peter III” at the slightest flick of a switch—through a change of clothes and virtually unnoticeable reconfiguration of forces. The question this and other forms of “passing” raise, of course, is whether this “flick” amounts to a real change, or just a repetition of the same.

### III. “FREEDOM”

The idea of the state reappears as we move from a consideration of the stage of “passage” to that of “freedom” itself, the destination to which the bondsmen are directed. The crucial topographical factor distinguishing the two settings is, of course, the absence of *sectionalism* in pre-emancipation Russia. Serf peasants had no “North” or “Canada” to which they might flee, no

“North Star” to guide them in the proper direction, and no “free states” where they might participate in agitation against slavery. There was, to be sure, a center of “high serfdom,” stretching very roughly from Nizhnyi Novgorod in the east to Kovno in the west, and from Pskov in the north to Kiev in the south, that grew less concentrated as one moved outward. Serfs regularly fled eastward into Siberia and southward toward the Caucasus, but without any strong sense that they were travelling to “a land of liberty,” in William Wells Brown’s phrase. Brown’s description of how his geographical imagination expanded while working on a Mississippi steamboat can stand as typical of the US alternative:

[I]n passing from place to place, and seeing new faces every day, and knowing that they could go where they pleased, I soon became unhappy, and several times thought of leaving the boat at some landing place, and trying to make my escape to Canada, which I had heard much about as a place where the slave might live, be free, and be protected. (385)

The perfect point of contrast with Brown here is the trajectory of Nikolai Shipov, who in 1845 finally escaped serfdom, after two abortive attempts and three terms of incarceration, through his discovery of an unusual law in the ninth volume of the Russian *Code of Laws*:

There I found a statute declaring that serfs who had been captured by mountain plunderers would be freed along with all their family upon escaping from captivity. Those freed serfs would then have the opportunity, within nine months of escape, of selecting whatever type of life and work that best pleased them. (438)<sup>15</sup>

As this was during the time of the first Russian imperialist war in the North Caucasus (1829–59), Shipov “decided then to attempt this severest of remedies, if only that I might be rid of the landlord’s power over me” (438). Traveling to Daghestan, he worked as a buyer and seller of provisions for the army, until deliberately falling captive to Daghestani “plunderers” in February 1845. Successfully fleeing from his captors after ten days, he thereby performed the amazing feat of escaping from two forms of bondage simultaneously. He was given his freedman’s “walking papers” in May of that year.

The key thing about Shipov’s narrative is that he escapes *through* Daghestan *back into* Russia. His tale is peppered with strong affirmations of Russian patriotism and even chauvinism (including some crude anti-Semitic broadsides), and he frequently affirms his attachment to his “dear native land,” as in this meditation during his first illegal trip to the Caucasus in 1836:

“What is going on in my dear native land,” I thought, “where the abundant Volga flows, where the Ural steppe stretches wide and free? And where am I dragging myself off to now? To the mountains of the Caucasus, where I’m in danger from bandits, anticipating death any minute. . . . O freedom, freedom! Where are those happy people who have never known persecution, never known constraint—under what star were they born? They live as they want to, by their own free will, and fear nothing—but I? Whether asleep or awake, it always seems that I’m being followed. They put me in a dungeon, take away my money, separate me from my wife and son and daughter, rule inside my home and give orders as they please; they send me away from my dear native place, and forbid me from shedding tears on the dust of my parents. . . .” (238)

Shipov would like to stay home and engage in the cattle trade in the steppe, just as his father had done. He insists that he does not flee from, but rather is *sent away from* his “dear native place.” Indeed, in reading the narratives of serfs, one often senses the proprietor-like relationship of the peasant to “Russia,” while the persecuting landowners are rendered subtly “foreign,” analogous to colonial invaders. In fact, at one point Shipov reveals an unusual sympathy for his Chechen and Daghestani captors, who are also underdogs in a colonial war with Russia. I think Shipov’s words here are best read as an allegorical screen, no doubt unconscious, concealing a reference to the *internal* colonization of peasant Russia itself by the elite:

While we were playing cards, a tall, fully armed Circassian came into the hut; he was received graciously by both my host and Mustafa, and respectfully they asked him to sit down. This Circassian glared at me fiercely, like a beast; it seemed that he wanted to devour me with his darting eyes. His gaze was hardly a surprise to me, however, for only rarely did any of the savages look at me with pity or a smile. This was understandable. All mountain peoples had lived freely and independently from time immemorial; only with Russians did they have to struggle so continuously and for so long. During that time a lot of Russian blood had been spilt. But from among the mountaineers, you might find only one out of every 10 who hadn’t had a grandfather, a father, a son, or some other relative killed by Russians. So how could a savage stare at me, other than with hate? (445)

For his part, “P” speaks of “Russian khans” and “the blossoming of Asiatic customs” (35, 120). In a “song of secret meditation” sung by a landlord, the poet savages the “grand tours” of the aristocracy for impoverishing the serfs at home:

When I left for my voyage  
 Beyond our own Russian border,  
 My protector was the profit I had made.  
 How can we not love it passionately?  
 With money, you can make it all the way  
 To Paris! But there, however, as you  
 Carry on, there's danger it'll be swept  
 Away. There you'll shine in seas of luxury,  
 Splashing against abundant [cash].  
 But the longer you stay there,  
 You'll see what shape your income's in . . .  
 It's half-dead, quietly rattling,  
 Then grows entirely weak, languishes;  
 Life fades from money hour by hour,  
 And the cheer it brings is less and less.  
 And so that we don't lose our funds abroad,  
 Home we go, to give our cash the cure!  
 We gather elders together in the village,  
 And give our income health again. (72)

But how could such antipathy toward the ruling class coexist with what we saw earlier—the serf acting through the forms offered by the state? The answer lies in the well-known phenomenon of “naïve monarchism”: the Russian peasantry’s belief that while the landowners and intermediate officials were avaricious and evil, the Tsar himself was their benefactor, their “father” or *bátiushka*.<sup>16</sup> This myth had several effects. First, it gave serfs the sense that the place in which they lived was in some ultimate sense their own, for there was a “line of sympathy” running between them and the leader. Second, it had the double consequence of making them subservient to Tsarism while constantly anticipating change—change the Tsar himself would effect by toppling all of the unjust hierarchy between himself and the peasants. Shipov exhibits his naïve monarchism very clearly when, on a trip to St. Petersburg, he chances to witness an inspection of the guard by Tsar Nicholas I and his son, the future Alexander II, emancipator of the serfs:

I succeeded in arriving [at the parade ground] before the crowd and got a good look at the Emperor . . . and at the Heir. The Sovereign had a strict, imperious gaze, and it seemed to me that, having seen his gaze once, one could never forget it. I gazed long and intently at the Heir, and never tired of looking at him. It's like I can see him now: exceedingly lovable—white, round-faced, and ruddy as a ripe red apple; his smile was kind and indescribably pleasing; his face seemed to express something important, something regal. I had a premonition then that this Tsar would be great—the protector of all the oppressed. (231)

Nikolai Smirnov's very different trajectory should be mentioned here for comparison. A serf but not a peasant, he grew up in Moscow around the most elevated noble circles, even entering Catherine II's royal court on one occasion. His aspirations and geographical imagination are clearly more akin to those of the noble service he himself served:

I wanted to travel directly to my young lords [then touring through Europe] and, appearing before them, beg of them both forgiveness for my (as I thought) involuntary crime, and for my liberty. In addition, I hoped to take advantage of their journey to satisfy a desire in which my soul had long since pined, namely, to visit foreign lands together with them. Upon receiving from them a letter of discharge, I hoped to remain for a time in Europe to renew, in some university or academy, those studies I had already begun. My greatest desire was to perfect my knowledge of Italian (in which I had already had a good amount of success) and of architecture and painting, and I continued to dream of studying these subjects in Rome or in Naples. I intended to return to my fatherland afterwards and register in the civil service.

"P"'s *News about Russia* is well known as one of the great products of naïve monarchism, surpassing virtually any other written version in its evident intensity of feeling. "God and Tsar are always with you!" is its motto, and only a poet deeply confident in his monarch's beneficence would dare to offer him the following exhortation:

Give freedom to Rus'!  
 Little time is left—you mustn't wait  
 For the black year to come, when rage  
 Will pour upon you, sudden thunder  
 Roar out from all sides, lightning shine out  
 In darkness, the throne shudder from the sound,  
 And the Tsar begin to tremble out of fear.  
 And not one of those fiends will find  
 A hiding place, not one escape—  
 Keen-eyed vengeance will cast its glances  
 Everywhere, and strike with savage death.  
 And, as though in tempestuous wrath,  
 The hurricane won't soon go quiet;  
 Not soon will the roaring ocean  
 Grow silent after this mighty disturbance.<sup>17</sup>

But in *News about Russia*, images of apocalypse are always succeeded by equally hyperbolic imaginings of happiness and joy. The very next lines read as follows:

But after the terrible weather  
 Quiet will step upon the earth,  
 And freedom's independence  
 Will be given to the people. . . .  
 And in such wonderful weather  
 The fruits of the earth will multiply,  
 And earth will turn all its harvest  
 Over to the laboring people.  
 And by knowledge we'll be led  
 From famines to resounding glory.  
 Talent will wrest itself from torment  
 And all will understand what is useful.  
 Half-savage great-grandparents will rejoice  
 In their great-grandchildren's intellects,  
 And all will begin to sing songs of praise  
 To God, in churches, in neat choirs. (147)

Such moments—and there are several in *News about Russia*, and a few similarly paradisiacal flashes in Shipov—allow us to link peasant ideology to our guiding topographical theme. Because even under conditions of bondage, naïve monarchism protects the state from becoming the object of absolute negativity, and because radical intervention is an imaginative possibility, Russia as a *national space* can be *positively* represented as a site of future freedom. If freedom happens, in other words, it will happen *here*. Escape is not required—and this belief opens the door to concrete *utopian* projections, and sheer daydreaming, rooted in that uncanny confidence in “the dear native place.”

Eugene Genovese has written brilliantly about “the lack of a revolutionary or politically militant millennialism and messianism among the slaves of the South” (274–75), and his analysis helps us understand what I think is the basic difference between the slave and serf topologies of freedom. The southern slave regime, he writes, “was too pervasive, too strong, too stable” to allow for any kind of *internal* overthrow or collapse to be conceived, thus throwing the imagination toward the “outside.” The slaves had no mythic sense of a sympathetic state authority separable from the day-to-day of surplus extraction in which they lived. If it existed, that authority was literally in a different world. By the same token, the far greater proximity of slaves and masters in the US, extending to matters of culture and diet, and the “paternal” involvement of masters in slave life, hindered for the most part the development of the apocalyptic social dualisms we find in Russia. There, it took little to imagine the “westernized,” often French-speaking, largely

absentee owners as alien parasites. Naïve monarchism enabled the serfs to assert at once their “national” right to Russia, and their radical distance from any tsarist authorities *below* the Tsar.

Beyond the terms of “slavery,” “freedom,” and “passage,” then, the notion of *achieved* freedom or *utopia* needs to be added to our discussion to account for the full range of what we might call the “geo-imaginary” possibilities implied by serf and slave narratives. In Russia, the space of slavery is convertible into a space of ideal freedom. The “raw materials” for the kind of paradise described by “P”—native talent, religious faith, the earth itself—are already present and need only to be activated. On the other hand, the moment of passage can suggest a model of ideal freedom in its own right, insofar as its accompanying disguises and confusions of identity open up radical possibilities of flux and mobility.

In general, the “freedom” sought by the serf is simply freedom from the category of bondsman, but not from *categories* as such. Shipov notes that the law he so cleverly manipulates also stipulates that the serf must, “within nine months of escape, [select] whatever type of life and work that best pleases [him]” (438). The former bondsman must register as a member of another “estate”—in Shipov’s case, as a merchant—must step into another set of definitions. Needless to say, Shipov does not recoil from this opportunity. At the same time, however, there are signs during his Daghestan captivity that he is tempted to “pass” in a different direction. He is filled with helpless admiration for the independence and fighting spirit of the “plunderers,” and at a few points betrays a longing for a similar life. These revelations are usually associated with his responses to women. He is candid about his sexual attraction to the woman who feeds him during his captivity (the wife of one his captors), and he makes a point of recounting how a Daghestani man offered his daughter to him in marriage. Even these new possibilities, however, always depend upon the categories provided by an existing order; they involve the manipulation or selective abandonment, but not the global abolition, of “passports” and “uniforms.”

The larger point is that the relationship between all four terms—slavery, freedom, passage, and utopia—is profoundly dialectical. An account of the geographical imagination of slave/serf narrators can never be content with a simple grid of reified options, but must also consider the ever-present, but rarely fully articulated, *project* of liberation traversing all the spaces concerned.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence of a different set of conditions and possibilities, another kind of (utopian) project is implied by US slave narratives, one in which the non-overlap of “freedom” and “utopia” plays a crucial role. We can turn to Frederick Douglass here for an introduction:



I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. (301–302)

Now Baltimore, of course, was not “the land of liberty.” But Douglass sees that “a city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation” (304), and this perception of an alternative (and superior) world breaks open a space wherein the desiring imagination might move. The full utopian element of the slave narrative is not obvious, however, until after the protagonist has already reached the geographical locus of “freedom.” At that point, and in spite of all the abolitionist imperatives informing the writing, a disappointment frequently sets in, a realization that “freedom” is less than it might be, and richly deserving of being set in scare quotes. Family has often been left behind, after all, and the logic of racism is shown to persist:

[In New Bedford, Massachusetts] I went in pursuit of a job of calking; but such was the strength of prejudice against color, among the white calkers, that they refused to work with me, and of course I could get no employment. (361)

On going into a hotel at St. John's [New Brunswick, Canada], we met the butler in the hall, to whom I said, “We wish to stop here to-night.” He turned around, scratching his head, evidently much put out. But thinking my wife was white, he replied, “We have plenty of room for the lady, but I don't know about yourself; we never take in colored folks.” (736)

We went to Albany in the steamboat Knickerbocker. When the gong sounded for tea, Mrs. Bruce said, “Linda, it is late, and you and baby had better come to the table with me.” . . . We were at the extreme end of the table. I was no sooner seated, than a gruff voice said, “Get up! You know you are not allowed to sit here.” I looked up, and, to my astonishment and indignation, saw that the speaker was a colored man. (919)

Taken from Frederick Douglass, William Craft, and Harriet Jacobs respectively, these three moments seem to have little to do with “utopia,” suggesting that the dialectic here is a profoundly negative one. The space opened up for the “freed” slave in the US is no positive vision of the type we sometimes find in Russia, but is born of the *gap* between radical democratic aspirations and the sad reality of the various “lands of liberty”—a gap, but not a cancellation. William L. Andrews has given us a superb account of this dialectic

of hope and failure in the slave narratives, arguing that these “persistently hopeful figures”

could never quite “get over,” for every time they thought they had crossed Jordan into campground, they found themselves deceived by a mirage and sojourning still in the same old desert. The pattern of this irony and *the search that it occasioned for another country within* is important to our understanding of the outsiders manqué. (188, my emphasis)

That the great US narratives so often mention the persistence of racism in the “campground,” suggests that the activist note on which they almost invariably conclude—furthering “the cause of my brethren” (Douglass 362)—ultimately pertains as much to a utopian project of building some livable social “biogeography” as to the anti-slavery cause proper.

Indeed, the topographic options that *eventually* emerge are even broader than Andrews suggests. They range from renewed passage—perhaps even to some “positive” utopian space, like the various nationalisms, or the Africa of Garveyism—to the carving out of “subjective space,” and as both Andrews and Genovese suggest, to a building of the ex-slave’s “own culture and community within a wider American civilization” (Genovese 275). No account of the topographic imaginary of bondage is complete, that is, without the structural *incompletion* and dissatisfaction that is utopia. As the Russian examples remind us, however, utopia’s greatest dissatisfaction is paradoxically with that incompleteness itself. Minds and bodies in search of freedom always move to posit some *shape*, in whatever language they have available, for the truly “habitable globe” envisioned by Frederick Douglass (325), in a project that in both Russia and the US is far from completion even today.

## NOTES

1. From Peter Kolchin’s great comparative study *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (1).
2. For the Atlantic side of the equation, see Gilroy.
3. The question of “comparable modernities” also recalls Tocqueville’s bold 1848 conjecture, offered at the end of volume one of *Democracy in America*, that “there are now two great nations in the world which, starting from different points, seem to be advancing toward the same goal: the Russians and the Anglo-Americans” (412).
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from texts in foreign languages are my own.
5. The full title is *The Life and Adventures of Andrei Bolotov, Written by Himself for his Descendants*; I am using A. V. Gulgyi’s 1986 edition.
6. Blumenberg’s remarks also lead us to consider the alternative structures taken by those narrated lives—often *women’s* lives—where possibilities for movement have been less available, but other sorts of sustenance have of necessity been found.

7. White servants on the run could simply pretend to be free, while “the proximity of the wilderness and of friendly tribes made escape relatively easy for Indian slaves” (Kolchin 11).
8. The idyll for Bakhtin is characterized by “a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one’s own home. . . . This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. But in this little spatially limited world a sequence of generations is localized that is potentially without limit. The unity of the life of generations . . . is primarily defined by the unity of place, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable” (225).
9. On the question of “the slave’s essential isolation,” see Foster 112.
10. Smirnov fell prey to con men along the way, and finally fell ill in St. Petersburg, where he was arrested. An initial death sentence was commuted to brutal corporal punishment, a sentence in turn commuted to exile in Siberia. His deposition is in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents, Moscow, section 7, file 2679, pages 66–67 recto and verso.
11. Shipov’s narrative first appeared in *Russkaia Starina* in 1881, but together with another nineteenth-century memoir, was edited by P. L. Zhatkin, and reprinted in 1933.
12. In August of 1849, a thick packet was given to the main post office in Petersburg, addressed to Prince Peter Georgievich Ol’denburgskii, a liberal-thinking aristocrat and relative of the tsar whose family estate was in the district of Iaroslavl’, northeast of Moscow. The half-literate scribblings on the packet, the cheap paper of which the envelope was made, and the absence of the name of the sender, all struck the prince’s officials as suspicious, and the packet was not accepted. In March of 1850, it was to be destroyed by the “dead letter” office, but postal officials opened it and found a notebook inside a covering of pink canvas, filled with verses. On the cover of the notebook were the following words: “This book, called *News about Russia*, is taken . . . from the deeds and words of the people, with an appendix in verse, by Peter O. . . . I would now like to dedicate my verse to the sovereign Emperor Nikolai under the following conditions: 1) that he read everything contained in the manuscript; and 2) that after reading it, he not prosecute the writer. Without prior agreement to these conditions, the manuscript is not to be read by the sovereign emperor Nikolai I and his exalted royal family, but consigned to the flames. The writer of the manuscript is a half-literate serf, belonging in body to a lord but in soul to Christ, Peter.” After reading the verses and finding their contents “blameworthy,” the political investigation and surveillance service or “Third Department” of the Tsar’s chancellery tried but failed to find the author of the verses, and the notebook was put into a file in the archive of the Third Department, where it remained, unknown, until the 20th century. *News about Russia* was published only once, in 1961 (the centenary of the emancipation of the serfs), under the editorship of T. G. Snytko, who apparently re-discovered the manuscript, which is in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), archive 109, file 100, from the year 1850. The poem was clearly thought to be authentic by the original investigators, and has been treated as such by later historians, including Daniel Field and Peter Kolchin.

13. In contrast, US racist logic is ultimately grounded, I would argue, in diffuse *cultural* beliefs and practices—though certainly reinforced, especially in the period under discussion, by state power.
14. For a truly “drag” rendition of the “pretender” scene, see the final color sequence of Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible II* (1958).
15. In this crucial passage, Shipov is actually referring to several laws: the principal one, statute 1089 in the 1842 Code of Laws, mandating the manumission of serfs (and their families) following their escape from mountain bondage; statute 5704 of the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiskoi Imperii* (1832), mandating the nine-month limit for choosing a “way of life” (e.g., as merchant, free peasant, etc.) following the manumission; and statute 18515 of the *Polnoe Sobranie* (1844), restricting manumission to the serf’s immediate family members.
16. The classic work in English on “naïve monarchism” is Daniel Field’s *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*. “The myth of the tsar, then, was disruptive and even . . . a ‘revolutionary ideology,’” Field writes, “Yet it also contributed to political stability. The peasantry . . . provided the tsarist regime with a broad social base, and did so largely under the influence of naïve monarchism. This was, to be sure, an inert base. The regime was doomed because, as soon as its social base quickened to life, pent-up antagonisms found expression in revolution” (24–25).
17. Rus’ is the traditional name for “the Russian lands,” and *volneniia*, which I translate here as “disturbance,” also means “peasant rebellion.”
18. I use “project” to allude to the specific meaning given it by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Search for a Method*, where the *project* is “the subjective surpassing of objectivity toward objectivity . . . stretched between the objective conditions of the environment and the objective structures of the field of possibles, represent[ing] *in itself* the moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity, those cardinal determinants of activity” (97).

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